International Journal of Children's Spirituality

ISSN: 1364-436X (Print) 1469-8455 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cijc20

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To cite this article: Ruth Wills (07 Jan 2026): Teaching for authenticity: an autoethnographic journey towards a spiritual pedagogy in the church and primary school, International Journal of Children's Spirituality, DOI: 10.1080/1364436X.2025.2610629

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2025.2610629

Published online: 07 Jan 2026.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY
https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2025.2610629

Teaching for authenticity: an autoethnographic journey towards a spiritual pedagogy in the church and primary school

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ABSTRACT

During my first inspection experience as a primary school music teacher, it was noted that my work contributed to the spiritual nature of the school. Since then, my exploration into what both children's spirituality and spiritual pedagogy entail has formed the basis of my writing and research. This commentary paper documents my journey from a practitioner perspective to a deeper understanding which has sought to identify a philosophical underpinning for authentic teaching and learning. Exploration through the lenses of Heidegger and Hegel in particular have led to Bildung being adopted as a pedagogical framework, outlined here through examples from practice. The article concludes with an assessment of spirituality in my current field, early childhood education, and considers the importance of spirituality for an authentic pedagogy for and with young children.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 July 2025
Accepted 23 December 2025

KEYWORDS
Spirituality; authenticity; Christian pedagogy; primary school pedagogy; Bildung

Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic self-reflection using retrieved personal and professional experiences to reflect on a journey into, and explorations of, children's spirituality. It concerns how an understanding of spirituality might underpin a search for authenticity in education; therefore, critically engaging with issues emerging through practice as an educator, the commentary to follow reflects my developing understanding of spirituality from practical and philosophical perspectives. It does not rely on empirical data to form conclusions.

Albeit identifying as a Christian, I have come to understand spirituality as a dynamic and fluid concept, including, but not limited to a religious framework. My journey has involved me exploring non-religious spirituality as a means to authentic learning within my work as a Primary school teacher, and through philosophical reflection I have also come to understand more fully what authentic Christian spirituality might entail, particularly in relation to my work in church. Therefore, the discussion oscillates between two

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contexts – church and school – drawing out insights and examples from each, and concluding with recommendations for practitioners.

This oscillation shapes the structure of the article. Using 'Bildung' as a pedagogical method (von Humboldt 2000), the commentary moves contextually between school and church, conceptually between religious and non-religious spirituality, and philosophically between ontology and epistemology. However, the tension arising between these is also highlighted; thus, as a loop whose sides are never fully resolved in themselves, the mobius strip serves as a metaphor (Lovlie 2003), providing an illustration of the how the unresolved relationship of differing positions might indeed be educative (Tubbs 2005).

The autoethnographic nature of this article also encourages readers to critically reflect on their own tensions within teaching, but furthermore, to evaluate the significance of unrest for the development and enhancement of an authentic approach to education. According to Edwards (2021, 1), autoethnography seeks to deepen an understanding of 'multiple complex dimensions of culture and interpersonal dynamics' in communities and organisations, and whilst reflecting on troubling experiences, this approach might also expose certain practices with a view to inspiring change. It is hoped therefore that in response, secular and religious policy makers, leaders and practitioners might be able to embrace 'Bildung' as a pedagogical tool, to allow children to experience authentic education and become agents of their own learning.

Spirituality in school

Since the introduction of the word 'spiritual' in the 1944 Education Act (Ministry of Education 1944), the language of spirituality has continually been on the agenda for schools in England and Wales. Published subsequently, the 1988 Education Act (HMSO) notes that schools would satisfy requirements if they were seen to:

> promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, and prepare such pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. (HMSO 1988, preamble)

The 1995 OFSTED handbook (OFSTED 1995) also indicates that an inspection would evaluate a school's provision for spiritual development for children from the age of five.

Since then, being a focal point of school inspections, the rhetoric of spirituality as part of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural education (SMSC) has become familiar across the teaching profession in England: its values are normally embedded within all aspects of the curriculum and wider school life (Eaude 2008). According to recent inspection frameworks (e.g., OFSTED 2019), spirituality includes personal beliefs and reflection on other's beliefs, and a sense of the non-material dimension of existence. It also concerns identity, including relationships with the self, others and the world. Pedagogy involves the promotion of a sense of wonder, fascination, imagination and creativity which might lead to questioning and reasoning, inspiring the search for a sense of meaning and purpose. It is distinguished from Religious Education within the English National Curriculum (DfE 2014).

My initial awareness of spirituality as a universal human concept took place during a school inspection back in 1996. During the inspection I was asked to bring all the classes together in the hall for a time of musical sharing. This was not a performance as such, but all children throughout the school shared a song, composition or soundscape with the

whole community. Following this event, the lead inspector wrote that music contributed to the spiritual life of the school:

> This was a celebration of joy and wonder. Every class contribution, varied and individual as they were, used music to reflect many aspects of life, painting emotional and personal pictures in sound. The quiet anticipation, the control of voice and instrument, the skills of musical composition between children created, within a context of trust, an almost unbelievably moving and spiritual performance.

Following this, not really understanding what it meant in a school context, I became interested in how spirituality might be understood as 'something fundamental in the human condition which is not necessarily experienced through the physical senses and/or expressed through everyday language' (SCAA 1995, 3) and what the value of this might be for learning. I was also fascinated to observe how the human characteristics noted above such as imagination and creativity might allow for a sense of meaning and purpose.

Two examples from practice continued my thinking. After listening to Elgar's 'Nimrod' in a music lesson, one child stated that she had experienced something of heaven. Through engaging with a non-verbal phenomenon – music – she was able to consider a dimension beyond the immediate. However, this was on her own terms, a result of an everyday experience of the curriculum (McCreery 1996), rather than a worship-based activity. She was later able to explore the meaning of this experience, allowing her to feel some comfort and hope following a bereavement. In a lesson on the water cycle, a younger child was able to reflect on how access to clean water is not equal across global contexts and asked what she could do to help others. Friends in her class suggested they try to turn the taps off in the bathroom, and that they research charities working to provide clean and safe water in other countries.

In these situations, meaning-making was personal and/or provoked a collective response. It was becoming clear to me that the hallmarks of spirituality, as described in educational policy, *were* able to promote authenticity in learning, bringing a new dimension to teaching. This piqued my interest further. Nevertheless, whilst included within the National Curriculum (DfE 2014), teaching driven by the requirement to meet targets seemed in fact to bypass spirituality, alluding to it rather than embracing the spirit of the child, thus leaving me dissatisfied.

In due course, my developing understanding of spirituality led me to consider how teachers in schools might provide a spiritual framework within which children can be encouraged to share their understandings of meaning and purpose, relationships and identity within authentic learning experiences. However, it would require an educational climate and workforce receptive to this idea before it would be noticed. Additionally, the development of my thinking also necessitated further study; hence it would be another twenty years until I revisited this idea for the primary school classroom, details of which are presented later.

Spirituality in church

At the same time, my interest in spirituality became pertinent to my voluntary work with children in church. In line with Sheldrake (1991), I began to recognise that spirituality grows out of life experiences rather than purely doctrine, and that its distinctives could be

non – prescriptive, concerned with all aspects of life. I started to consider spirituality in relation to the *Imago Dei* of the Christian tradition drawn from Genesis 1 verse 27 which deems humanity as being made in the image of God (McGrath 1994). It became necessary to view children as innately and universally spiritual, at all times and not just in a worship context. This signified the start of an understanding of ontology and person-centred spirituality, marking a change in thinking from that which prioritised epistemology, that is, faith development in relation to knowledge and understanding.

As another example, a young boy, having listened to the Bible story of creation, was able to construct his own understanding of theology. He shared that he felt sorry for his sins when he accepted that God is so powerful. In the light of this, it became clear that children were able to express something of an understanding of God without having first been 'taught' and I could identify how music and story respectively became a 'way in' to a consideration of how to promote a personal experience of 'faith' for children.

During the early 2000s I left teaching to work for a Christian organisation, engaging in faith development whilst also undertaking Master's research into children's spirituality. Therefore, I was able to continue exploring how understanding spirituality as an ontological state might underpin the importance of children acknowledging their spiritual selves in relation to God and others, to inspire meaning-making and in some cases, transformation.

Theoretical explorations of Christian spirituality

On commencement of my role in the Christian organisation, I was signposted to *Children Finding Faith* by Francis Bridger (2000). This text presents a linear approach to faith development. The ontological supposition here is of an *a priori* separation from God, with the epistemological supposition that individuals should accept and believe certain truths in order for the separation to be bridged. This bridging is traditionally known as 'conversion' and as the author writes: 'conversion is concerned with an event or moment in the life of an individual child when he or she makes a decision to turn to Christ and to accept him' (Bridger 2000, 139). He suggests that it is at this point that a child's relationship with God begins. Griffiths (2009) concurs and suggests that the emphasis on leading children *towards* a life of faith is placed on a rational and outwardly recognised decision.

Critical thinking led me to question why the more inwardly positioned categories such as identity, relation and meaning-making were minimised in favour of an outward decision. Indeed, in the two short examples described earlier, these particular categories were significant factors in the children's theological reflection. Understanding who they are in relation to God or heaven led them to construct meaning around issues of the Christian faith (i.e., God's power, our sinful nature, and the reality of an afterlife). I considered that when learners position themselves in the centre of meaning-making, stimulated but not directed by elements of faith, the journey is not *towards* a focal point; who they are in their innate spiritual state is the point *from which* the journey proceeds. Children are always spiritual, with transformation resulting from their developing identity, relationships and meaning-making.

Following this, I read *The Spirit of the Child* by Hay and Nye (1998). This text is based on empirical data and endorses the recognition that spirituality is innate, originating within but going beyond the immediate. Drawing on the work of zoologist Alister Hardy (1979)

and noting how spirituality is biologically natural to all human beings from birth, Hay and Nye (1998) claim that spirituality is intrinsic to humanity and essential for human survival. To be human is to be spiritual; it is also universal. Although the authors identified as Christian, in the text they posit that spirituality is indeed concerned with personal and communal awareness and perception as well as doctrine and ideology, culture and creed.

Additionally, Hay and Nye (1998) promote the notion of a meta-human dimension of experience which takes pedagogy away from what is known epistemologically to what is inspired ontologically. Affective categories such as flow, the felt sense, wonder and awe, and imagination all exemplify how one's intrinsic spiritual state, the starting point for spiritual growth, might be identified and nurtured. Often spiritual experience bypasses cognition: Hay and Nye describe spirituality as pertaining to a state of meta-cognition. Their research posits that learners can transcend objective truth claims by means of holistic experiences through which they can explore or 'test' religious views or perspectives. As a result, children's own ideas drawn from their personal spiritual experiences are valued and accepted as meaningful – essentially promoting teaching for authenticity. This was very much reminiscent of my own developing thinking at the time and was confirmed in my ongoing research at Master's level.

Nevertheless, this position posed a challenge to both the theological and pedagogical paradigm of my paid work. My organisation's practice was aligned with the linear progression described above and whilst I felt this to be inadequate, I needed to understand why. Therefore, it became necessary to explore the emerging theory of children's spirituality. Reading the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* and attending the inaugural International Conference on Children's Spirituality in 2000 were both positive influences, and my thinking was further developed through conversations with colleagues within the 'Children's Spirituality' community. The categories of identity, relation, meaning-making and transformation were more fully explored in articles within the journal including those by Champagne (2003), Webster (2004), Hyde (2005), Watson (2008) and de Souza (2011), whose work provided a theoretical foundation for my own research and practice with children in church and out-of-church Christian activities.

Authenticity

Beyond this however, it was also necessary to investigate the origins of ontology and to make sense of how this might underpin learning beyond the 'purely cognitive approach' (Hay and Nye 2006, 76). When considering ontology as the *a priori* of human experience, Martin Heidegger's phenomenology in *Being and Time* (1962) provides a detailed description of the existence of the self through a number of states that are integral to Being, and relevant to pedagogy in both church and school.

Heidegger (1962) proposes that phenomenalogical methodology should not proceed 'to' an end but reside within 'the immediate awareness of existence' (Gelven 1970, 35). Rejecting epistemology as the foundation of learning, his position supports the view that education is authentic when it takes place through the Being that belongs to the learner (Heidegger 1962). As an ontological state, Being precedes potentiality, which also precedes meaning-making; therefore, learning involves understandings drawn from the *a priori* state of Being rather than those imposed from without. Authenticity recognises the potentiality of each child in their Being, with meaning making arising from the

possibility, not actuality, of 'truth'. For teachers in church, this highlights the inadequacy of a paradigm that prioritises facts, information, or non-negotiable doctrine, but rather promotes understandings as expressions of children's personal experience.

For Heidegger (1962), Being is not an isolated phenomenon: it concerns both identity and relation. Grounded upon the *a priori* state of Being-in-the-world, authentic learning takes place in the open space between Beings in a shared existence rather than in a subject/object separation. Identity and relationships are not factual or present-at-hand but an open space of Being-with others in their own potentiality. 'World' is not a physical place or, as described above, a conceptual framework of definitive ways to be or behave, or beliefs to be held. Rather, in line with Buber (1970), it is a space in which a learner's potentiality can be nurtured in connection with other(s). For teachers in school, this allows for collaboration, inclusivity, connectedness and at times, transcendence, all of which are hallmarks of spirituality (OFSTED 2019).

Heideggerian philosophy supports the thesis that spiritual pedagogy starts with the child. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) claim that spiritual learning involves the 'disclosure that we are already immersed in Being' (2006, 134). This allows learners to embrace the possibility and potentiality that is offered by their primal human state to allow them to engage in authentic learning. Hay and Nye's view of relational consciousness as an ontological connection between an individual and four categories of 'other', also supports the idea that there is spiritual potentiality in every child, whatever their context might be. Whilst one category of relational consciousness relates to a transcendent other referred to as God, the dimensions of the world, community and the self are described as the ontological foundation of spirituality – an 'ever- present aspect of being human, separate from and prior to the discursive intellect' (Hay and Nye 2006, 134).

For teachers in school, this encourages children to explore their identity and place within the world, to ask difficult questions and to consider what might be beyond the ordinary. It also allows for the search for meaning and purpose, and the opportunity to make a difference. For example, a group of nine and ten year old children asked to use Music lessons to write a song protesting against climate change, evidencing their collective response to a significant issue affecting the world, and their desire to promote change.

For teachers in church, the role of relational consciousness is not to overcome the opposition between the learner and God but to allow the child to gain a heightened awareness of their *a priori* relationship. This consequently leads the educator to focus more on Being than doctrine, and allows children to challenge normative understandings or beliefs. In another example, when making music to retell the story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3), one child argued that it is impossible to recreate a sound for God, leading the children to engage in a discussion about the nature of God and the difficulties believing in a phenomenon that cannot be seen. In this case, understandings were not fixed, and indeed remained provisional.

The tension

In time, I came to be critical of Hay and Nye's view of spirituality (1998/2006), in particular the notion that it bypasses cognition and that the spiritual life is always and only Being (Wills 2012). Having oscillated away from a more epistemological position to consider

ontology as the basis for meaning-making and understanding, I subsequently returned to view thought-consciousness as necessary in the learning process. For a school context, when referring back to elements of spiritual pedagogy highlighted in Ofsted guidance (OFSTED 2019), I noted how creativity, questioning and inspiring the search for a sense of meaning and purpose require a level of cognition. Equally, for church, whilst an understanding of innate spirituality serves as a starting point for a growing connection with the divine, in relation to the Christian faith it is necessary to acknowledge the theological framework that exists, without which Christian pedagogy would be groundless. In freeing itself from thought, self-validated truth as possibility can create its own truth (Tubbs 2009). Eschewing thought-consciousness has the potential to inspire learning that is nebulous and unclear, with the potential to promote ambiguity, uncertainty and insecurity.

Nevertheless, my views on the limitations of the linear approach which prioritises epistemology were still relevant. Master's degree research data seemed to underscore my desire to promote teaching and learning experiences authentic to the understandings of children as spiritual learners *a priori* and to facilitate the questioning and curiosity which in turn might draw them towards an interest in the Christian framework of belief. Reflecting the oscillating of the mobius strip, a movement away from also but back to this position occurred, resulting metaphorically, in being unable to rest.

Moving into doctoral research, models and methods employed by my Christian organisation were scrutinised in relation to their view on the significance of the spiritual state of the child. In the cases where the linear approach was prioritised, questions were raised in relation to how a knowledge-based pedagogy might promote authenticity in learning. Problems such as spiritual voyeurism (Wills 2023), limitations of representation (Erricker and Erricker 2000) and the dominant role of the adult (Ingersoll 2014) contributed to defining a mastery approach to education. On the other hand, it was necessary to scrutinise the ontological approach, highlighting the inadequacies of a purely open-ended pedagogy within a belief-based system. Prioritising one seemed to negate the other; thus at this point, the oscillation between positions induced a tension.

The Unhappy Consciousness: a process of pedagogy for Christian education

In wrestling with this uneasy relationship, it was philosophy rather than theology that became my way of understanding this tension with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) being a helpful tool. Hegel's notion of the Unhappy Consciousness (1977) asserts that for authenticity, there is no scope for one form of consciousness to dominate the other. This plays out in the illustration of a master/slave relationship. Independent consciousness, existing purely for itself, is characterised by a master. He has a slave, who as negativity, is dependent on the master for his own identity. But equally, the truth of the master as an independent consciousness comes in his dependence on the slave. The master is only truth in the fact that he has a slave. The intersubjective nature of the master/slave relationship means that each is truth the light of the 'other' (Hegel 1977).

However, what is important here is that the Unhappy Consciousness is also a relationship of struggle. In coming to know the truth of himself, each attempts the death of the other. Perceiving his truth to be in-itself, the master seeks to subjugate the slave to perpetuate his own self-sufficiency. The slave, also seeking his own truth,

attempts freedom from the oppression of the master to attain his own essentiality. As a result, the continuous process of negation causes a state of unrest that is rarely resolved (Hegel 1977).

Reminiscent of my own struggle, a critical view of the Unhappy Consciousness (Hegel 1977) raised a fear that in bypassing inherited Christian beliefs, ontology might lead to religious inauthenticity; equally, I was concerned that learning that does not acknowledge the child's own Being would be hollow and meaningless. However, the tension is not bad news for education. For Hegel (1977), truth comes in the middle term between the two positions. He writes of a dialectical unity where the two parts reside together but rather than *unified*, they exist in a relation of unrest. The gap between positions remains but it is *within* the gap caused by the unrest where authentic learning takes place.

For teachers in church particularly, an understanding of the tension allows for a pedagogy that involves learners drawing on their ontological spiritual state and their unique life experiences to inform personal perspectives on Bible stories, aspects of doctrine and faith-based rituals, as opposed to uncritically accepting normative and inherited views. Allowing for greater agency, this might involve learners wrestling with epistemological difficulty, such as questioning why the world's population was eradicated in the Flood (Genesis 6) or formulating values aligned with but not dictated by doctrine such as exploring the practices of other faiths. Without rejecting central beliefs, the tension can indeed inspire the development of new ideas and understandings that can be tested, evaluated and debated within a space that places children's spirituality in the centre (Hyde, Ota, and Yust 2013).

Bildung: a process of pedagogy for the primary school

The movement within the relation of the Unhappy Consciousness might be aligned with the German educational principle 'Bildung' which relates to the noun 'bild' meaning image, with the suffix 'ung' concerning process (Nordenbo 2003). Here the individual is an agent who takes part in their own formation. The agent of Bildung is not like Hegel's slave; this agent learns through relation. According to von Humboldt (2000), education involves an interplay between self and other in a continuous movement. This relation ensures that a diversity of 'tools', including the senses and feeling, allow for different ideas to be shaped, much akin to the categories of spiritual awareness (Hay and Nye 2006). Learners also reach beyond the self to 'external objects', but then reflect 'given' understandings back to their inner being in a continuous process of questioning and critical thinking.

This aligns with the views of Hyde (2010, 94) who describes agency as 'the ability of children to understand their world and act upon it', highlighting how through personal engagement with the artefacts of their lives, be they the curriculum, friendships or aspects of culture, learners are able to 'influence learning and construct meaning for themselves' within their own cultural contexts. The movement of Bildung also ensures that there is no singular means of understanding learning experiences. Noting the ontological nature of agency, de Souza (2010, 35) suggests that in relation to the curriculum, the possibility of agentic education can 'enhance spiritual expression through intuitive, imaginative and creative responses that stem from deep within the individual'.

Having considered The Unhappy Consciousness (Hegel 1977) in relation to Christian education, Bildung works well as a process to be applied in school. As a metaphor, the mobius strip (Lovlie 2003) represents a broken circularity in which each side plays a part, oscillates between positions, but has no fixed end result. This was true for me pedagogically and personally. Continuing along my own mobius strip, my doctoral years and since have found me back in the teaching profession, both in primary school and higher education contexts, allowing me to consider in the past decade, how children's classroom experiences can go beyond linear learning driven by performativity (Eaude, Hyde and Rouse 2025), to become authentic, meaningful and even transformative.

Bildung (von Humboldt 2000) became the pedagogical tool that supported my developing thesis on how children's spirituality might inspire authentic education, a theme explored in two monographs written for practitioners in primary schools. In the first, *Learning beyond the objective in primary education* (Wills 2020), I posit how an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the ontological state of the learner and the curriculum (as epistemology) can inspire an awareness of self, relationships and the world to promote meaning-making in authentic learning. The spiritual dimension of Being interplays with pre-determined aspects of learning to allow for the re-evaluation of what is understood in immediacy; thus, critical reflection on inherited ideas developed through sensory and emotional engagement can inspire learners to develop personal meanings or alternate views regarding what is presented in class.

Nevertheless, what is understood as *fait accompli*> also has the potential to shed light on the inadequacies of purely personal perspectives. Allowing for the oscillation from and to the inner and outer dimensions of learning, neither has the upper hand; however, learning beyond externally determined outcomes that also transcends the purely personal provides a platform for creativity, criticality and the formation of new thinking or even behaviours. This requires teachers to provide space for children to act as agents of their own learning, setting agendas, questioning or challenging assumptions, but also encourages personal reflection and an opportunity for children to relate learning to their thoughts and feelings, and to support or even challenge their worldviews. This idea resonates with the view of Adams, Hyde, and Woolley (2008) who seek to reclaim the political nature of children's spirituality, allowing learners to be able to form their own views, have a voice and take action for change, as illustrated in the following example from school.

In one Music lesson, a group of ten-year-old children sang the song 'Oh freedom' as part of a topic on the Civil Rights Movement. In the lesson, the externally determined curriculum objectives for history and music were followed. However, in the movement of interplay between their spiritual selves and the learning, they were able to engage emotionally with the meaning of the song. Through the oscillation between inner and outer dimensions of learning as they sang, in the middle space they were able to reflect and create new and authentic meanings. One child began to cry and stated that we should never let oppression happen in this way again. Another child asked the existential question of why oppression exists, and another asked what can be done to help those who suffer. A further child suggested that they should encourage difference in their families and model good behaviour on the playground.

Following this, again using Bildung as a method, my second monograph aims to address the issue of personal responsibility and transformation. Reflecting on the spiritual

nature of the outdoor space for young children, *Nature, spirituality and early childhood education* (Wills 2024) suggests that spirituality can and should inspire change. Much of the discussion reflects for example the value of experiencing awe and wonder at the natural world, or taking comfort from the sense of presence inspired by flowers, plants and animals. However, my conjecture here is that spiritual pedagogy must affect behaviour. Written with practitioners and policy makers in early childhood education in mind, the rhetoric reflects how learning outdoors might promote an authentic sense of self, leading again to agency, child-centred pedagogy and a sense of social responsibility.

In nature, the interplay of the self with the natural environment can promote spiritual awareness such as flow, the felt sense, wonder and awe, and imagination (Hay and Nye 1998/2006). As per the mobius strip, awareness sensing in a dialectical relation with thought consciousness can inspire an interpretation of events as a mode of potentiality so that children can simply ask: what does this mean? Meaning making, problem solving and critical reflection drawn from awareness sensing can inspire children to try to make sense of their experiences and formulate their own questions. These questions might relate to immediate issues such as how to keep the outdoor space tidy, or how to work together as a team. But often the questions relate to concern for others and the world. Again, reaching outwards from the self, children offer a response. This can lead for example to their taking responsibility, such as protecting creatures such as bugs and local wildlife, or the natural environment itself through for example watering and litter picking. However, it might also promote a concern for the future of the world, encouraging them to take part in responsible sustainable actions.

It is interesting to note that in England and Wales, whilst now embedded in the National Curriculum for children aged five and above (DfE 2014), the language of spirituality is not evident within the policy or guidance documents for the Early Years Foundation Stage (e.g., Department for Education 2024). Yet, based on my own reflections on experiences in a classroom setting with four-year-old children, aspects of spirituality such as imagination, creativity, identity formation and friendship are evident through all aspects of learning, both outdoors and in the classroom space.

Conclusion

As this autoethnographic journey concludes, it is important to note that including the rhetoric of spirituality within future iterations of early childhood policy in England (Department for Education 2024) is imperative, not only for the promotion of well-being and personal development, but also to highlight the benefits of learning that starts with the child's potentiality-for-Being (Heidegger 1962), and serves to develop identity, relationships, critical thinking and a sense of social responsibility. My suggestion for early years practitioners in schools is that they listen and observe children's responses to learning, and to draw on their own unique skills and understandings to create authentic and meaningful educational experiences. Including outdoor learning, creative arts, storytelling and exploratory play in the curriculum for instance might allow for the enabling environment (DfE 2024) to become a spiritual space (Hyde, Ota, and Yust 2013) within which learners can make meaning authentically on the grounds of their Being.

For teachers of older children in schools, this discussion, much like the mobius strip, evidences circularity. Supporting the hallmarks of spirituality outlined at the beginning of

this piece (OFSTED 2019), I suggest that teachers pay attention to how children evidence these in their learning, not so that a box can be ticked, but so that their 'ground up' spiritual responses can provoke the further development of ideas, concerns, relationships, beliefs and values. This includes:

- Asking existential questions
- Imagination and creativity
- Respect for feelings
- Reflection on experiences
- Meaning making from reflection

Finally, it is recommended that teachers in church need not organise or plan tightly knit active programmes. It might be enough for learners to read the Bible together with no agenda or conditions, question and debate in a safe space, and together make meanings relevant for their personal and collective lived experiences.

In each case, a Bildung approach can continue to frame the process of reflection and action in learning, attentive to both the individual learner and the 'world' beyond for an authentic and spiritual experience of education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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